Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006

Message Text

PAGE 01 NATO 00681 01 OF 02 072154Z

70
ACTION EUR-12

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AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
USLOSACLANT
USCINCEUR
USNMR SHAPE
USDOCOSOUTH
AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 USNATO 0681

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, MILI, NATO, OR, XF, XG, XI
SUBJECT: NATO STUDY ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF REOPENING THE SUEZ CANAL

REF: USNATO 0658

1. HEREWITH TEXT OF INTERNATIONAL MILITARY STAFF'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE SUBJECT STUDY. ADDRESSEES PLEASE NOTE THIS CONTRIBUTION IS IN TWO PARTS, I.E. MILITARY IMPLICATIONS OF THE REOPENING OF THE SUEZ CANAL AS SEEN FROM AN INTELLIGENCE VIEWPOINT, AND FROM AN OPERATIONAL VIEWPOINT. (IMS CONTRIBUTION WAS CIRCULATED UNDER COVER OF IMSWM-17-75. FIRST PART BEARS CLASSIFICATION "NATO SECRET" AND SECOND PART BEARS CLASSIFICATION "NATO CONFIDENTIAL.")

2. BEGIN TEXT PART ONE:

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PAGE 02 NATO 00681 01 OF 02 072154Z

INTELLIGENCE VIEWPOINT
THE MILITARY IMPLICATIONS OF THE REOPENING
OF THE SUEZ CANAL

Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006

Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006

-SUMMARY-

THE PRINCIPAL MILITARY IMPLICATION OF REOPENING THE SUEZ CANAL WILL BE THE INCREASED NAVAL FLEXIBILITY AFFORDED TO THE SOVIET UNION. TAKEN ALONE THE REOPENING PROBABLY WILL NOT IN ITSELF CAUSE A SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN THE SIZE OF SOVIET NAVAL FORCES WHICH CURRENTLY ARE OPERATING IN THE INDIAN OCEAN. THE REOPENED WATERWAY WILL, HOWEVER, PROVIDE THE USSR WITH AN EASIER AND MORE TIMELY ACCESS TO THE INDIAN OCEAN, EASE LOGISTIC SUPPORT DIFFICULTIES, AND PERMIT EASIER AND MORE COST EFFECTIVE DELIVERY OF MILITARY AID TO RECIPIENTS IN THE AREA. NO INCREASED MILITARY THREAT TO THE NATO ALLIANCE AS A WHOLE IS FORESEEN; HOWEVER, INDIVIDUAL NATIONS WITH INTERESTS IN THE AREA MAY NEVERTHELESS FIND THEMSELVES FACED WITH THE NEED TO RESPOND TO AN INCREASED SOVIET PRESENCE IF IT SHOULD OCCUR.

- DISCUSSION -

1. AT THE TIME OF ITS CLOSURE DURING THE 1967 ARAB-ISRAELI WAR, THE SUEZ CANAL HAD THE CAPABILITY TO PERMIT TRANSITS OF SHIPS WITH A DRAFT UP TO APPROXIMATELY 38 FEET AND A DRY CARGO OR FULLY LOADED TANKER-SIZED VESSEL UP TO 50,000 DEADWEIGHT TONS (DWT). THE PERIOD OF CLOSURE RESULTED IN SOME SILTING POSSIBLY EXACERBATED BY THE DEBRIS FROM BOTH THE 1967 AND 1973 WARS. COMBINED ENDEAVOURS BY EGYPT, THE UNITED KINGDOM, THE UNITED STATES AND FRANCE HAVE BEEN COMPLETED TO REMOVE THE MAJOR OBSTRUCTIONS IN THE WATERWAY. CONTRIBUTING TO THESE EFFORTS ALSO, THE SOVIETS PARTICIPATED IN CLEARING MINEFIELDS LAID BY THE EGYPTIANS IN THE SOUTHERN PORTION
OF THE GULF OF SUEZ.

2. CURRENT APPRAISALS INDICATE THAT THE CANAL TECHNICALLY CAN BE OPENED FOR MARITIME TRAFFIC IN ABOUT MARCH/APRIL 1975. IF REOPENED AT ITS PRE-1967 STANDARDS, THE CANAL WOULD ALLOW PASSAGE OF ALL OPERATIONAL SHIPS IN THE SOVIET NAVAL AND MERCHANT FLEETS. HOWEVER, ONLY TWO OF THE FOURTEEN UNITED STATES ATTACK AIRCRAFT CARRIERS COULD NEGOTIATE THE CANAL, BUT ALL OTHER WESTERN

NATO WARSHIPS COULD TRANSIT THE CANAL. WHILE ITS CAPACITY INITIALLY MAY BE REDUCED SOMEWHAT FROM ITS 1967 CAPABILITY, THERE ARE STRONG INDICATIONS THAT SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS ARE BEING CONSIDERED, BUT THE MILITARY CONSEQUENCES ARE NOT YET CLEAR. SOME REPORTS FORESEE FRENCH ELECTRONIC EXPERTS ASSISTING IN RE-ESTABLISHING REQUIRED COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEMS, AND POSSIBLY WITH JAPANESE EQUIPMENT.

3. STRATEGICALLY, A REOPENED CANAL CAN IMPROVE SOVIET NAVAL FLEXIBILITY BY REDUCING TRANSIT TIME FOR SHIPS FROM EACH OF THE THREE SOVIET WESTERN FLEET BASES AND THE MEDITERRANEAN SQUADRON.

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Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006

ALTHOUGH, IN THE PAST, MAJOR SURFACE UNITS OF THE SOVIET INDIAN OCEAN SQUADRON (SOVINDRON) HAVE BEEN DEPLOYED FROM THE PACIFIC FLEET, A REOPENED SUEZ CANAL WILL PERMIT THE AUGMENTATION OF THE SQUADRON IN THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN MORE QUICKLY IN A TIME OF CRISIS THAN HAS BEEN PREVIOUSLY POSSIBLE. WHILE THE REDUCTION IN TRANSIT TIME

TO THE INDIAN OCEAN WOULD BE SIGNIFICANT, THE REOPENING OF THE CANAL IN ITSELF IS NOT EXPECTED TO CAUSE A MAJOR INCREASE IN SOVIET SHIPDAYS ON STATION IN THE AREA. ANY MEANINGFUL CHANGE IN NAVAL DEPLOYMENT WOULD REQUIRE A DECISION BY SOVIET PLANNERS TO REORDER PRIORITIES AND TO SHIFT NAVAL ELEMENTS FROM OTHER AREAS. THIS WOULD RESULT IN DRAWING DOWN NAVAL FORCES NOW ALLOCATED TO OTHER TASKS. CURRENTLY, THE USSR MAINTAINS A FORCE OF APPROXIMATELY50-60 SHIPS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA AND ABOUT 20 IN THE INDIAN OCEAN. THE ACCOMPANYING CHART SHOWS THE INCREASED FLEXIBILITY WHICH MAY BE PROVIDED TO THE SOVIETS; FOR EXAMPLE, IF AN AVERAGE SPEED OF 16 KNOTS IS ASSUMED, STEAMING TIMES VIA THE CANAL COULD PLACE SOVIET VESSELS IN THE PERSIAN GULF IN ONLY 11 DAYS FROM THE BLACK SEA (CURRENTLY IT TAKES COME 22 DAYS VIA THE CAPE) AS COMPARED TO 17 DAYS FROM THE PACIFIC FLEET AT VLADIVOSTOK.

4.DOUBTELESS THE SOVIETS ARE WELL AWARE OF THE VARIED ADVANTGES AND RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH THE IMPROVED FLEXIBILITY FOR MILITARY OPERATIONS TO BE DERIVED FROM REOPENING THE CANAL. ACCESS TO THE CANAL WOULD REMOVE THE GEOGRAPHIC DISADVANTAGE THAT NOW PREVENTS THE SOVIET NAVY FROM REACHING THE INDIAN OCEAN AS QUICKLY AS UNITED STATES NAVAL FORCES FROM THE PACIFIC.

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PAGE 01 NATO 00681 02 OF 02 072206Z

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 AF-06 NEA-09 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-03 INR-07 L-02

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AMEMBASSY CAIRO
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Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006

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S E C R E T SECTION 2 OF 2 USNATO 0681

5. THE ASSOCIATED SOVIET DEPLOYMENT TO THE INDIAN OCEAN POSES CERTAIN PROBLEMS OF LOGISTIC SUPPORT. THE SOVIETS, WHILE IMPROVING, STILL HAVE A LIMITED CAPABILITY FOR AT-SEA, UNDERWAY REPLENISHMENT, AND CONSIDERABLE EFFORT HAS BEEN DEVOTED TO ACQUIRE LOCAL SHORE FACILITIES. DESPITE ITS SUCCESSES IN ESTABLISHING THESE FACILITIES, THE USSR RECOGNIZES THAT THERE ARE RISKS OF SUDDEN LIMITATIONS OR EVEN EJECTIONS BY HOST GOVERNMENTS; RECENT EVENTS IN EGYPT AND THE SUDAN PROVIDE A REMAINDER OF THE POSSIBILITY THAT SIMILAR HAPPENINGS COULD OCCUR IN IRAQ, THE PEOPLES' DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF YEMEN OR SOMALIA, WHERE THEY PRESENTLY ARE INSTALLED. ADDED TO THESE UNCERTAINTITIES, THE SOVIETS ARE THOUGHT TO RECOGNIZE THAT THE CANAL IS SUBJECT TO CLOSURE IN A CRISIS, WHETHER BY THE EGYPTIANS OR ANY OTHER INVOLVED PARTY.

6. RE-OPENING OF THE CANAL WILL ASSIST MATERIALLY IN THE
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PAGE 02 NATO 00681 02 OF 02 072206Z

SUPPLY OF MILITARY ASSISTANCE TO NATIONS SUCH AS SOMALIA, THE PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF YEMEN AND POSSIBLY ETHIOPIA IN THE FUTURE. ADDITIONALLY, THE SOVIETS WOULD HAVE AVAILABLE FOR OTHER PURPOSES APPROXIMATELY 560,000 DWT OF SHIPPING THAT HAS BEEN USED FOR ARMS DELIVERIES SINCE THE CANAL'S CLOSURE, OWING TO THE LONGER DISTANCES INVOLVED.

7. IT MUST BE BORNE IN MIND THAT THE SOVMEDRON WHICH HAS SOME FACILITIES IN PORT SAID COULD, IN A CRISIS, CLOSE THE CANAL TO, OR OBSTRUCT ITS USE BY, NATO SHIPPING, IF THIS APPREARED TO BE IN THEIR INTERESTS.
END TEXT PART ONE

3. BEGIN TEXT PART TWO:

OPERATIONAL VIEWPOINT
MILITARY IMPLICATIONS OF THE RE-OPENING OF
THE SUEZ CANAL

1. THE SUEZ CANAL IS OUTSIDE THE NATO AREA, AND WOULD NOT THEREFORE NORMALLY BE CONSIDERED FOR USE BY NATO FORCES. NEVERTHELESS ANY CHANGE IN THREAT POSED BY A RE-OPENING WOULD HAVE TO BE CONSIDERED BY MAJOR NATO COMMANDERS IN THE CONTINUING EVALUATION OF THEIR GENERAL DEFENCE PLANS.

2. IN CONSIDERING THE IMPLICATIONS FOR NATO FROM THE RE-OPENING OF THE SUEZ CANAL, IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO RETAIN A

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SENSE OF PROPORTION. OBVIOUSLY THE IMPLICATIONS WOULD BE
CONSIDERABLE, IN WAR, IF THE CANAL WERE TO REMAIN OPEN.
HOWEVER, IT COULD BE RECLOSED BY NATO OR
BY THE SOVIETS IN A MATTER OF HOURS AND IT IS INCONCEIVABLE
EITH THAT IT WOULD REMAIN IN USE BY BOTH SIDES, OR THAT EITHER
SIDE WWOULD LEAVE IT OPEN IF THIS SHOULD PROVIDE AN ADVANTAGE
TO THE OTHER. FROM THE STRATEGIC POINT OF VIEW IN TIME OF WAR,
THEREFORE, THE RE-OPENING OF THE CANAL HAS NO IMPLICATIONS
WHATEVER.

3. NOR WOULD THERE APPEAR TO BE ANY IMPLICATIONS FROM A
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PAGE 03 NATO 00681 02 OF 02 072206Z

REOPENING OF THE CANAL IN A TIME OF TENSION SINCE, DURING SUCH
A PERIOD, BOTH NATO AND THE SOVIETS WOULD BE PRE-POSITIONING
FORCES AND, CLEARLY, PLACING THEM EXACTLY WHERE THEY WOULD
PLACE THEM EVEN IF THE CANAL WERE NOT RE-OPENED. INDEED THE
ONLY POSSIBLE IMPLICATION
WOULD BE THE REMOTE POSSIBILITY OF A GRAVE MISCALCULATION
BY EITHER SIDE TO AN EXTENT WHICH LEFT MARITIME FORCES, REMOVED
FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN AND REQUIRED BACK, THE WRONG (SOUTHERN)
END OF THE SUEZ CANAL AND LIABLE
TO ISOLATION THROUGH ITS RECLOSURE. SUCH A
POSSIBILITY WOULD BE MORE DAMAGING TO THE SOVIETS WHOSE
SHIPS WOULD FIND IT VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO RE-ENTER THE MEDI-
TERRANEAN ANY OTHER WAY THAN IT WOULD FOR NATO WHO COULD
REINFORCE QUICKLY FROM THE ATLANTIC.

4. NATO'S AIM HOWEVER IS DETERRENCE AND THE FACT THAT A
RE-OPENING OF THE SUEZ CANAL WILL GIVE THE SOVIETS ACCESS
FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN/BLACK SEA TO THE RED SEA AND ARABIAN
SEAS AND THE INDIAN OCEAN PROVIDES THEM, IN PEACETIME, WITH
A GREATLY INCREASED AND MORE FLEXIBLE MEANS OF EXERTING POLITICAL
PRESSURE IN THOSE AREAS AND THIS COULD WELL REQUIRE AN ADDITIONAL
MARITIME PRESENCE BY NATO NATIONS TO OFFSET SUCH PRESSURE. THIS
PRESENCE OUTSIDE THE NATO AREA WOULD ENTIAL MORE NATIONAL LOGISTIC
BACKING AND ADDITIONAL BASES. THESE IN TURN, PROBABLY MEAN
LESSER EFFORT WITHIN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND OTHER NATO AREAS
AND COULD THUS HAVING A WEAKENING EFFECT ON NATO'S DEFENCE
POSTURE IN NATO'S AREAS.

5. IT IS ALSO OBVIOUS THAT A RE-OPENING OF THE CANAL MIGHT
HAVE ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS WHICH MIGHT IMPINGE ON DEFENCE
EFFORTS AND ESPECIALLY SO ON THE CARRIAGE OF OIL. THE ECONOMIC
FACTORS INVOLVED ARE, AS YET HOWEVER, UNKNOWN ALTHOUGH IT
IS BELIEVED THAT THE OVERALL SAVING THROUGH USING THE CANAL
MIGHT WELL BE FAR LESS THAN WOULD APPEAR, AT FIRST SIGHT,
TO BE THE CASE. IN ANY CASE SUCH FACTORS WOULD HAVE NO RELE-
VANCE IN WAR WHEN, AS ALREADY MENTIONED, THE CANAL COULD SO
EASILY BE RECLOSED.

Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006

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6. IT CAN BE FORESEEN THAT A RE-OPENING OF THE CANAL WILL
RESULT IN A CONSIDERABLE INCREASE IN THE FLOW OF NATO
MERCHANT SHIPPING IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN. THE NATO MIL-
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PAGE 04 NATO 00681 02 OF 02 072206Z

ITARY AUTHORITIES WILL, FOR THIS REASON, HAVE TO RECONSIDER
THEIR PRESENT PLANS CONCERNING NAVAL CONTROL OF SHIPPING TO
ENSURE THAT THE MEASEURES, INCLUDING DESIGNATIONS OF CONTROL
AND INDOCTRINATION PORTS, ARE SUFFICIENT TO CATER FOR THIS
INCREASE IN NUMBER OF MERCHANT SHIPS.
END TEXT PART TWO. BRUCE

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